

CLAN ALPINE MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 196,128 acres

The Clan Alpine Mountains WSA (NV-030-102) is located in Churchill County in west central Nevada. The WSA includes 196,128 acres of BLM lands. Although private lands form a portion of the WSA boundary, there are no private inholdings. The WSA is bounded by County Road 376, private lands and roads on the east, and a road and section lines on the north. Three roads and a power line comprise the southern boundary while a combination of section lines and dirt roads form the boundary on the west.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 68,458 acres recommended for wilderness

127,670 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The 68,458 acres recommended for wilderness designation lie in the heart of the Clan Alpine Mountains WSA. They include Mount Augusta, the highest peak in the range, as well as several smaller peaks. Also included are several twisting, deeply dissected canyons, all of which provide an ideal environment for a variety of recreational activities. Horse Creek and Cherry Creek contain trout fisheries, an added bonus since fishable streams are so rare in this portion of Nevada. Deep Canyon is noted for its huge rock formations, spires and hoodoos. A variety of wildlife, including mule deer, mountain lions, desert bighorn sheep, sage grouse and raptors, such as golden eagles and prairie falcons, may be seen in the WSA.

Wilderness designation would protect a large portion of the WSA's most significant wilderness values, while minimizing the conflicts with other resources. Although the potential for undiscovered gold and silver resources is high in the lower Florence and upper Starr Canyon areas, the mineral and energy potential in the majority of the area is considered only moderate. The wilderness values in this area are of extremely high quality and outweigh the mineral values which would be foregone as a result of designation. The area recommended suitable is manageable as wilderness due to its extreme ruggedness, lack of major intrusions and absence of complicating factors such as private inholdings or known mineral reserves.

Those areas of the WSA not recommended for wilderness occur in the northern half of the WSA or along the periphery of the area. These have been excluded for several reasons, including low to moderate wilderness values, mineral and woodland product resource values, and manageability problems.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The majority of the Clan Alpine Mountains WSA is in an essentially natural condition. The area is generally quite rugged and ranges from an elevation of approximately 3,600 feet in Dixie Valley up to 9,966 feet on the summit of Mt. Augusta. The WSA contains several peaks over 8,000 feet and numerous deeply incised canyons leading down to the valley floors on both the east and west.

Within the WSA, evidence of man's activities is minimal with the exception of ways. In an area of over 196,000 acres, man-made intrusions include thirteen developed springs, one small earthen reservoir, one well, one pipeline three miles in length and two other pipelines each less than 200 yards in length, two big game guzzlers and nine miles of fenceline spread among sixteen separate locations. The impact of these intrusions is relatively insignificant in an area of this size. There are 39 miles of ways divided among 35 separate segments within the WSA. Most of these ways are relatively short, are found around the periphery of the study area and extend into the interior from the boundary.

Fourteen cherrystem roads, totaling 41.3 miles, penetrate the WSA from every side except in the extreme northeast. Only 9.7 miles of road, in four segments, penetrate the area recommended for wilderness

designation. With the exception of four short ways, the suitable portion of the unit is in an extremely natural condition.

B. Solitude: The Clan Alpine Mountains WSA contains outstanding opportunities for solitude. The WSA is thirty miles long and ranges from seven to fifteen miles in width. Most of the WSA is highly dissected with over twenty named canyons and dozens of unnamed ones. In general, the area may be characterized as rugged, mountainous and possessing excellent topographic screening. The middle elevations of the WSA afford the best opportunities to experience a sense of seclusion and solitude due to the deeply incised terrain and the excellent vegetative screening.

Since 1968, the Fallon Naval Air Station (NAS) has conducted air warfare training in the restricted airspace which blankets the entire WSA. The Navy is in the process of increasing air operations over all four WSAs in the eastern part of the District, including the Clan Alpine Mountains WSA. With an increase in air operations, impacts upon solitude in the WSA could be severe. While it is difficult to accurately estimate the actual impact of these operations, it must be assumed that given the frequency of operations being considered, solitude opportunities may be diminished substantially and there could be a negative impact to the overall wilderness quality of the WSA.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The Clan Alpine Mountains WSA has recreational opportunities that are outstanding both from a qualitative and quantitative standpoint. These include day hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, camping, hunting, fishing, cross-country skiing, wildlife observation, nature study and photography. In virtually every case, the visitor would enjoy a high quality experience.

D. Special Features: The high scenic quality of the area is considered to be a special feature. From atop the ridgeline of the Clan Alpine Mountains, the Sierra Nevada can be seen 100 miles to the west. The New Pass and Desatoya Ranges lie to the east in front of the Toiyabe Range, rising behind them 40 miles away. These broad vistas greatly enhance the feeling of isolation and solitude within the WSA. There are also numerous scenic canyons, geologic formations and structures exposed along nearly vertical fault scarps, ridges and riparian areas throughout the interior of the WSA. In particular, the rugged aspect of Horse Creek Canyon and the strange rock hoodoos of Deep Canyon will impress a visitor to the WSA.

The brook trout fisheries of Horse Creek and Cherry Creek are special features that are found in very few drainages in this part of Nevada. Although both the creeks and the fish are relatively small, hiking and fishing along those streams present an interesting challenge. Desert bighorn sheep, once native to the range but eliminated through poaching and diseases transmitted by domestic sheep which grazed the area until the 1940s, were successfully reintroduced into the WSA in 1986.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The portion of the WSA recommended for wilderness designation can reasonably be managed as wilderness. It has few resource conflicts, although the presence of the non-WSA intrusion which surrounds Railroad Ridge and a portion of Cherry Valley may result in some management difficulties arising from ORV use on those adjacent lands. No development of energy/or mineral resources is anticipated. There are no private land inholdings.

Those portions of the WSA not recommended for wilderness designation could be difficult to manage as wilderness. The presence of numerous ways, and the lack of topographic relief on the flat alluvial fans would make the control of off-road vehicle traffic in these areas extremely difficult.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The majority of the area is estimated to have a low potential for metallic mineral resources and the entire area has a low resource potential for undiscovered oil and gas and geothermal energy. The potential for undiscovered gold and silver resources is high in the lower Florence and upper Starr Canyon areas, and moderate just to the south of Florence Canyon's mouth and also north of Starr Canyon all the way to Cherry Creek. An area of moderate resource potential for undiscovered molybdenum resources was found in the northwest near Grover Canyon and a smaller area with similar potential was located in the east central portion of the study area. In the far northeastern part of the area recommended suitable for wilderness designation, two zones were found to have a moderate mineral resource potential for antimony. There is no known potential for nonmetallic mineral resources.

In the 127,670 acres not recommended for wilderness, mineral and energy resource potential varies, with the best potential found north of Byers Canyon and along the east central range front. No active mines are located within or adjacent to the WSA, however, exploration continues and the potential for undiscovered metallic mineral resources is believed to be high. The remainder of the area north of Byers Canyon is considered to have moderate favorability for mineral resource discoveries.

No geothermal deposits of any significance exist within the WSA, however, the region along the east central range front has high prospective value. Known geothermal deposits exist just north and west of the WSA. There are no known oil and gas deposits nor are there indications of such.

Strategic and critical minerals known to occur within the WSA include antimony, tungsten, fluor spar, lead, mercury, copper and silver.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

A total of 54 comments, which specifically mentioned the Clan Alpine Mountains WSA, were received on the draft EIS. Thirty-eight commentors supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA. Sixteen commentors supported no wilderness for the WSA.

Those favoring wilderness commented on the area's scenic quality, outstanding solitude and primitive recreation opportunities, unique ecosystems and large size. Those opposing designation stated that the area is roaded, lacks the requisite wilderness qualities, has no solitude due to aircraft overflights, and has substantial mineral potential. In addition, several commentors reiterated an opposition to wilderness in general.

The National Park Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of the Navy, the State of Nevada and the Churchill County Commissioners all commented on the draft EIS. The Park Service was concerned about preservation of cultural resources. The Department of the Navy felt that wilderness designation could constrain air warfare training activities at some future date. The Governor of Nevada's consistency review initially opposed designation of the area as wilderness, but now the State supports the Proposed Action. Churchill County voiced a general opposition to any wilderness designations within the county and cited the mineral potential of the area and impacts to solitude from low flying aircraft from NAS Fallon. The other agencies did not identify any specific jurisdictional conflicts with any of the alternatives.

Three comment letters received on the final EIS. The EPA supported the Proposed Action, stating that it would protect water and air quality in the area. The Department of the Navy felt that certain terms in the document required clarification. Two individuals submitted a general protest letter which stated that the EIS violated NEPA and should be totally rewritten.